

## The informal city as a different way of urban regeneration

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### Introduction

Starting from the point of view of Western architectural thought, the informal city is an oxymoron. This is the idea of the city made by "urban facts" where architecture is only one aspect of a more complex reality of a particular structure but at the same time it represents the most concrete point of view with which to tackle the problem (Rossi 1966); this architecture considers the slum as an error to be resolved through a "strong" project that replaces the barracks with houses, possibly "modern", and creates "services", public places, possibly monumental, capable of restoring identity and character to "parts" of cities lacking of them.

According to the definition given by UN Habitat in 2003 a slum is a densely populated urban area, characterized by squalor and very low level of habitation (UN Habitat 2003). This definition holds together very different situations from a geographical, cultural, social, technological point of view. These situations go from the Brazilian *favelas* to the French *irréguiliers quarters*, from the African *mabanda* to the American *ghetto*, from the Spanish *marginal barrios* to the Italian *campi rom*. Recent research on the informal cities establishes slums as urban agglomerations characterized by a lack of basic services, low quality housing, outside housing standards and illegal, overcrowding and high density, anti-hygienic and dangerous living conditions, insecurity and precariousness of the possession of housing or land, poverty and social exclusion, a minimum size of the settlements (Avanzo, Calevro 2014).

The physical, economic and social neglect characterizes most of the informal settlements and, obviously, is an emergency to be faced. However, very often, the governments actions were not decisive precisely because they addressed the issue from a specific point of view, i.e. the one of housing emergency or of infrastructure lack, and have not taken into account the fact that in the condition of "informal, undoubtedly negative, however complex group dynamics develop, at the limit, as Laura Fregolent underlines, it is possible to observe how a district or an extended piece of city grew in an informal and unplanned way, is often provided with alternative rules to the traditional ones or it has produced a nearly virtuous governance activities that, in a un-informal context, would define urban management (Ostanel 2017).

One of the most emblematic examples of these experiences is the Caracas tower designed by Enrique Gomez for the Venezuelan banker David Brillembourg, as the headquarters of the financial group Confinanzas and Banco Metropolitano. In 1994 the economic crisis blocked the construction and in 2007 and 750 families occupied the unfinished building transforming it into a sort of self-managed and self-regulated "residential community". In 2012 the jury of the Venice Biennale assigns the Golden Lion for the best installation in the arsenal spaces to the Urban Think Tank collective, which for 12 months has elected the David / Gran Horizonte Tower as an experimental platform for the informal study. The group realized the project shown at Biennale to make explicit and to communicate visitors the internal dynamics of the community that has occupied the building.

by their team works on an idea of architecture based on the involvement of the inhabitants and aims at developing proposals to redevelop the tower. In particular, new hypotheses of service and connection infrastructures are designed together with the SuAT Chair engineers in Zurich. "Nothing new under the sun" someone would say, the participation dates back to the '70s, to the team X and De Carlo, and after all the history of the Tower of Caracas recalls New Venice, the city-slum born from the sinking of a real estate speculation, inspired by the architectural and urban theories of Yona Friedman and described in the novel by Colonel Durruti "la strega mascherata".

However, the approach by U\_TT show some innovative positions that have to be underlined. First of all, the informal "city" was not read as a metastasis to be eliminated from the body of the city but as a structure with a "sense" that has to be understood through a change of paradigm and point of view and, secondly, the work

carried out by the experimental laboratory did not consist so much (or not only) in a "participatory" approach aimed at involving the inhabitants but on the observation and the study (lasting one year) of the dynamics inside the skyscraper. We could say... learning from the informal city.

The research presented in this paper aims to verify if and how, through the architectural project, it is possible to consider some marginal social groups of our society as protagonists of innovation, using their specific cultural components as activators for the urban regeneration of some "residual" places where the concentration of these categories is generally more widespread.

From our point of view the expression "architecture project" does not refer to the "outcome", the beautiful building or the well-designed space, but to a process that, starting from the construction of a demand, constructs scenarios, tools and strategies of intervention "resilient" and capable of "adapting" to changes imposed by the challenges of our time. Therefore some "residual" territories, areas and places, on the border of the city, represent our field of action are, i.e. landscapes traditionally "waste" where functions and "inconvenient" subjects are localized. To these is imputed a degradation that pre-exists their settlement. Our "actors" are precisely these subjects, not considered as elements to be absorbed and "to be integrated" into our cultural, social and urban model, but as activators, able to propose, starting from their culture, different urban models that, perhaps for this reason, are more adherent to the characteristics of the place in which they have chosen (for different reasons) to settle or in which they have been "confined". It is perhaps possible to start urban regeneration from their ability to listen to places that others no longer have.

## **Methodology**

Like many researches, the one at the basis of this paper, starts from an inductive logic. The case study, on which some reflections contained in this article are based, is the upgrading of an area occupied by the gipsy camp at Scampia in via Cupa Perillo until summer 2017 when it was destroyed by fire. The project hypothesis elaborated in a thesis developed with the Municipality of Naples, works on two levels, the "material" one aimed at reducing the physical and environmental degradation of this residual area; and the "immaterial" one that aims to reduce the socio-spatial exclusion and the marginal conditions of the settled community. The inclusion that we hope for, and the exclusion that this community experiences, is implemented on three levels: social, economic and spatial. None of the three aspects can be investigated individually without continuous interdisciplinary calls.

Our work was essentially divided into three steps: the first one was the construction of a cognitive framework related to the condition of the Roma in Italy and specifically in Naples, the second step consisted in the physical description of the camp and of its rules of settlement; the third one aimed at developing a new model of Roma village that was not an abstract hypothesis, dropped from above, but was the result of a process that tries to interpret and translate into a shape the set of knowledge gained also through the comparison with some associations and with the Department of Environment of the City of Naples, currently engaged in land decontamination.

According to the magazine Panorama in Italy there are about 180,000 people of Roma and Sinti origin. 50% of them are Italian and four out of five live in regular housing, work and study just like other Italian or foreign citizens in our country. Instead about 40,000 people live in the camps. For many years, Europe has criticized us for the ineffectiveness of the solutions adopted in the integration of these communities, despite the assets invested. Criticisms are above all because we let to persist of the conditions of ghettoization related to the presence of "camps" that, in addition to not ensuring adequate housing conditions, radicalizes the condition of isolation of the included / recluse social group. In reality what seems to emerge from this framework of knowledge is that the Roma camps issues are more complex than they seem. As Antonio Tosi said, the field also represents a structure of social and cultural relationships, as well as an idea of living different from that of the condominium or building for housing. The field represents, with all its limitations, an idea of community (Patti 2015).

First of all we have to consider, about the presence of Roma in the territory of the Municipality of Naples, that it is very difficult to obtain qualitative and quantitative data, this due to several factors including: the heterogeneity of geographic origin of the Roma population present in Naples; the "emergency" and

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"securitario" approach that until now characterized public action about the topic of Roma integration, that has shifted many of the investigations into the issue of public policy actions; the fact that most of the Roma living in Naples are without a residence permit and, therefore, like the other "irregular" migrants, are forced to turn to the illegal or informal market for finding work and

Considering these premises, the most reliable sources, even if partial, about the quantity and quality of the Roma presence in Naples are the third sector and the Roma Office and the "patti di Cittadinanza developed by the Municipality. In Naples the Roma presence can be distinguished in three types depending on the nationality, the area of origin, the period and the reasons of immigration. The first group, the more ancient settled and fairly well integrated, is the Roma with Italian citizenship, probably belonging to the Roma napoletan, there are very few data around this group. The second one is that of the "Slavic" Roma, coming from the Balkan region, in particular from Serbia and Bosnia that start arriving in Naples in the '70s and then increased their number in the 90s after the outbreak of the conflict in the Ex- Yugoslavia. Very few of them granted refugee status. The third group is the Romanian Roma, whose largest migratory flow began in 2000 when, following the start of procedures for Romania's entry into the EU, it became easier to obtain a visa.

The housing condition of Italian Roma seems not to be very different from that of the other weaker Neapolitan groups. Regarding the un-Italian Roma we can say that some of them live in apartments in the historic center with no contract and in overcrowded conditions, others live in the camps or otherwise in precarious and marginal conditions and only few people lives in the refuges set up by the Municipality.

In general it can be argued that some Roma consider moving into an apartment a cultural genocide but at the same time many of them recognize the fact that the camp becomes a problem when sanitary conditions are precarious; different is the logic of the self-built village as Iaio told. He is the head of a community who in the book "Abitare illegale" by Staid tells how a sort of horizontal condominium is built regulating itself becoming a village that protects a different way of life.

Until recently, the final solution to the camps was considered popular housing; however, some experiences have shown that the transfer of Roma people in apartments does not always work and not only for economic reasons linked to the fact that these families do not have a fixed income and stability to be able to re-enter the rents, but also because some of them find extraordinarily difficult to adapt to live in a condominium.

The camp recounts: here there are private, semi-public and public spaces, with a different conception of private property, the house hosts the extension of the common space. The space of relationships and life is the outside. Spontaneous camps, on the border of illegality, are not out of the world, they are linked to the territory, everything enters even if filtered. The city establishes a relationship with these cells even if it is not visible in urban planning instruments. An informal field is born and grows in relative freedom, structuring itself according to the internal dynamics and to the relationships existing between the famiglie and the groups that live there. From the form taken by a field it is possible to trace the friendships and kinship existing, the relationships that are woven but also the mutual distrust between different groups and the closure of the camp outside represents the self-defense of the Roma communities arising from the events occurred in the years of social and spatial exclusion.

### Forming process

The Cupa Perillo camp was built spontaneously, it is far from the urban streets and in close relationship with some infrastructures used as a shield and refuge from hostile and indiscreet looks. The camp grew at different times starting from the area closer the "Asse mediano". The first encampments settled in via Cupa Perillo was built, according to a logic of self-exclusion respect the urban fabric, using the infrastructure to hide themselves. As the camp extends and becomes crowded, the housing units occupy a larger portion of the lot, so they go out the "protection" of the route but continue to maintain a "safe distance" from the urban streets so as houses can be at the most "glimpsed" but never seen. When the route is flanked by the "skyway" the spaces below the viaduct create unusual spaces, often identifiable as fragments of other contemporary places defined mostly by objects that are located between the infrastructural constructions with the same apparent indifference with which they would be placed elsewhere. (Vanore 2000)

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The structure of the camp is based on two main relationships to be investigated. First of all the relation with the infrastructures that makes the area a “residual lot” respect to the urban logic of the context and a “waiting space”, with its temporal suspension; then the relation with the urban roads from which the houses always withdraws of at least a hundred meters, hiding themselves thanks to the help of walls, vegetation and any other element that can act as a barrier. Until August 2017, the camp was a large settlement that even occupied the downhill ramps of the median route, closed because never checked after the built, and the adjacent roundabout. Inside, the settlement gave shape to the internal dynamics and relationships between families and groups that lived there and even if the sanitary conditions were generally very problematic, (this due to the presence of an illegal landfill in the vicinity and several unpaved roads) the camp represented a “part” of city characterized by an inner core of houses generally arranged in clusters around a common area and by a ring of more “public” functions arranged towards the edge.

As time goes by, housing became more and more stable. The first nucleus consisted of tents and caravans, then on one hand other groups start establishing in the area and on the other old inhabitants set permanently in this naturally space introverted and congruent with their need of protection. So families started to build real and own houses with bricks, sheets and other materials of fortune according to an “evolutionary” logic that made the house change, enlarge or “bud” when a family expanded or somebody else arrived from the country of origin. The space as it was structured told about the more or less peaceful coexistence of five different groups, each one characterized by different generations. The houses were very well maintained, there was a very high level of flexibility and customization of the spaces, each house hosted a single-family that consist of about six or seven individual and was organized according to a regular plan on a single level. Usually houses were closed towards the road and open on the common areas.

In 2017 a fire completely destroyed the camp. The municipality of Naples, and in particular the Environmental Council, is working on the decontamination of the area and this represents an opportunity to develop the idea of an urban structure that resumes some aspects of the old camp and at the same time tries to establish more stable and “open” relationships with the context where the area is, in order to make it more permeable, porous and connected to the around urban fabric. Therefore, new possible accesses car for and pedestrian ones were identified on the different sides of the lot in order to make it less “enclave” and more “crossing territory”.

The new settlement is designed by rethinking the two “archetypes” characterizing the camp: the wall and the refuge. The area is defined and surrounded by a new border, an architecture-wall (fig.2) that, on one hand, continues to protect the nucleus of the residences and, on the other, instead of representing a barrier tries to become a filter capable of triggering a progressive exchange between what is inside and what is outside. In fact, in this architecture some public places and services are located that aim to “reactivate” and increase the functions already existing in the destroyed camp. The aim of this architecture-wall is to support the opening of the camp towards the external context. In addition to the repair shop and the waste storage area, there are rooms in the building-wall to be used for the initiatives of the numerous associations that deal with the integration of the Roma in Scampia, such as those of CHICU<sup>1</sup>, the gastronomic space and cultural currently established in the Scampia Auditorium and managed by the “Chi Rom and Chi No” associations and the social enterprise Kumpania srls. From barrier to habitable wall... the edge line becomes a filter and, on the urban scale, establishes relationships between parts of cities that are more or less permeable. The wall becomes an opportunity to regenerate some areas, bringing appropriate dimensions, measures and scales that relate different worlds and the boundaries stop being line and becomes “thickness”.

The other element that characterizes the new settlement is the refuge or otherwise the house. The problem that the project aimed to solve was: how to reconcile the maximum possible flexibility with the hygienic-sanitary requirements that impose the location of services and the passage of the plumbing and the electrical system? The “technical” answer was to “measure” the empty area through a “grid” and to localize the “core system” in the vertices of it; this element consists of a prefabricated concrete core that contains all the predispositions for connections to the plant. It is rectangle (6 by 3 meters) capable of hosting kitchen and toilet. The first masterplan, however, gave back a very rigid image that reminded a “castrum”. It was not much closer to the idea of constructing a flexible spaces that could cluster around different “common” spaces. The shape of the camp was not capable of “telling” and supporting the social structure of the inhabitants. This was the reason why we chose to work on more “layers” in order to cross different directions and grids that open up to different possible configurations of the space, by overlapping and synthesizing

themselves (fig.3). The shape of the new camp so remind to the informal logic but, at the same time, does not renounce to an order. It aims to ensure the quality of "normal" living without renouncing the flexibility and personalization of spaces, which as we said "fit" the internal dynamics of the community and is often an indispensable condition for the maintenance of precarious equilibriums (fig.4).

## **Conclusion**

The experience of the Roma camp in Cupa Perillo represented the starting point of a wider research that aims to investigate the evolution of particular urban aggregates inhabited by "foreign" populations to trigger new possibilities of urban regeneration.

Generally, the "foreigners" settle in or are settled in places that are the results of a story of progressive loss of value and of social and economic urban decline. This story determines the conditions for the locationing of poor people, i.e. low rents or lack of control and therefore greater possibility to re-propose models and uses different from those of the "host" society. The result is that the community in which these individuals are inserted is, already in itself, a "community on the margins" that looks at the arrive of "newcomers" as a further element of degradation. So this community barely tolerates the "foreigners" and only on condition that they renounce their habits and social, cultural, civil and religious customs. Most of the individuals who make up the host community try to leave the quarter as soon as their own economic conditions make it possible. In doing so, it may happen, and often in the long run it so happens, that the quantitative relationship between guests and hosts is reversed and that these places are transformed into enclaves in which the newcomers try to rebuild their living models in an "informal" and temporary way. So foreign people tend to exclude the host society and at once the society rejects foreigners.

This inversion of quantitative relationships, between guests and hosts, validates the hypothesis behind the research, that is to consider foreigners as potential activators of urban regeneration operations. At the same time it highlights the potential weakness of this "gamble", because starting from foreign groups - to propose alternative hypotheses of urban regeneration able to accommodate other "models of living", other ideas of public space, other places of worship- risks increasing the separation and therefore the conflict with the host society.

Starting from these considerations linked to the fact that the condition of "foreigners" poses different questions compared to the problems of the settlement (not just the more specifically residential) of migrants, nomads and refugees, the research aims to verify if and how the architectural project can contribute to taking on some of these problems and to construct some answers with a logic different from the traditional one, that the architectural project can make concrete.

As we previously said, the postulate of this research is not considering "guest" subjects as elements to be absorbed and "integrated" into our cultural, social and urban model, but as potential "activators" of the design process. The basic hypothesis is that this condition can be particularly productive not only for the "groups" and the "communities" guesyed but also for the host ones and can trigger innovative forms of "inclusion" and "urban regeneration". This practice, urban rigeneration, is by definition sensitive to the characteristics of the place, oriented towards resilience and linked to the bottom up transformation mechanisms. Innovative forms above all because they are based on the search for a "specificity" of these "foreign" settlements, this can introduce different qualities in the area and for this reason is useful and interesting also for the host community.

Thus design experimentation becomes an instrument to highlight these potential benefits and specific qualities and the architectural point of view represents, in all the phases of the work the, the look used to examine problems identified. But according to this logic, the research starts from the belief that the architectural project is called to show, rather than its ability to offer definitive answers, its procedural nature (Amirante 2018), i.e. the nature of a process that, starting from the construction of a question, builds

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scenarios, tools and intervention strategies "resilient" and capable of "adapting" to the changes imposed by the challenges of our time.

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**Captions:** (insert max 4 images JPEG 300 dpi as separate files)

Fig.1 The Masterplan of the Roma Camp

Fig 2. The "Wall"

Fig 3. Working by layers

Fig. 4 The informal city